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ABSTRACT

Argument can be seen to connect writing in the high schools and colleges. Argument is the instrument people use to probe, in a principled way, other people's statements about who they are, what they know, and how they understand the circumstances in which they live and communicate with one another. Rhetoric is finding the available means of persuasion in any given case; argument is what can be done after that. Three suggestions about argument can be taken as points of departure for the discussion: (1) Argument involves taking a position on a topic or subject on which reasonable people may disagree; (2) As much as arguments are founded on knowledge, they are also shaped by non-knowledge; and (3) Argument is inextricably tied to ethics. For these reasons, it is important for students to see that what they do when they write is to make an argument, to take a position among other positions, and that by writing they are establishing themselves as members of a community, a polis, a discipline. To see writing this way is to better prepare students for the kind of principled and critical work they will face in the first-year college writing classroom. (NKA)

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An Argument for Argument:
What High School Students Need to Know about Rhetoric

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The title of my paper suggests that I'm going to make a programmatic statement about rhetoric and the high school curriculum. In fact, what I'll say has more to do with how argument can be seen to connect writing in the high schools and colleges. It's a statement about what rhetoric is -- or what it should be taken to be -- and how it functions in a writing curriculum. First, why rhetoric? Or, given the rise of post-process theories founded on constructivist models of thought, or on studies of culture, or of literacy, why would we want to resurrect this very old-fashioned term that, in an election season, sounds like another term for hot air or spin? In fact, far from being a catalogue of style, or a formal system of language and thought sucked dry by most textbooks (including some good ones), rhetoric is simply another term for argumentative discourse. If being rhetorical is what we have to be in the face of a contingent world -- a world ruled not by the laws of nature but by human behavior that is often unpredictable even when the humans in question like and understand one another -- then argument is how we make sense of those contingencies. By argument I don't mean the kind of disagreement a high school student has with her mother or brother; it doesn't involve shouting or name-calling. Argument is the instrument people use to probe, in a principled way, one another's statements about who they are, what they know, and how they understand the circumstances in which they live and communicate with one another. Rhetoric is finding the available means of persuasion in any given case; argument is what you do

once you've found them. So to argue you need not only to know something about the given case, and about the people with whom you're arguing; you also need to use that knowledge to change the nature of the case and the people involved.

Let me now make three suggestive remarks about argument that we can take as points of departure for the discussion and workshop about connecting the high school and college writing curriculum. The first is this: argument involves taking a position on a topic or subject on which reasonable people may disagree. There are several implications to take from this statement. One is that ideally writing is not merely expository. Describing the position you take on abortion, say, or on whether English should be the country's official language, doesn't help you engage or argue with someone who takes the opposing position. The research paper, the bane of first-year writing teachers, is a case in point: laying out a thorough description of what Napster is, or what the legal debates surrounding it have been, is great fun. But (and I know this from experience) knowing those positions, or even how cool the technology is, doesn't help if you're not willing to explain why you think it's a good idea for this technology to proliferate. In order to take a position on an issue about which reasonable people disagree, a writer needs to understand the foundation of the argument, the more general claims -- what Toulmin called warrants -- that all parties had to agree to in order for the argument to proceed. Argument involves widening the intellectual context in which arguments are made, and that means giving writers an opportunity to explore not just the "opinions" and "facts" of

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the case, but also where "opinion" and "fact" bleed into one another depending upon which party in the argument you're listening to. Making an argument means not just laying out what you know about an issue (going to the library; mining your own experience), but it also means finding out what your interlocutor knows, and figuring out what common ground you share, what assumptions bind you together, and how opinion and received facts are shaped (and not just "found").

Next, as much as arguments are founded on knowledge, they're also shaped by non-knowledge. To build on the point I've just made, in order to engage in a principled disagreement -- in order to argue -- you need to understand as much as possible the issue at hand. The rhetorical tradition from Aristotle insisted that while a writer doesn't need to be an expert in the topic he's arguing, he'd better know enough to be able to hold his own with other non-experts. But in order to know the possible lines of argument -- in order to anticipate how members of an audience will react or how an opponent will respond, you also need to know how those arguments are shaped by different discourse communities (or, to use other terms, in other disciplines) and how your interlocutor's understanding of the argument is shaped by other members of that community or discipline. Part of the problem here is that "audience analysis" of the writing textbook variety often devolves into dreadful tautology: the answer to the question of who might be the audience for essay on the presidential election in Time magazine is often "people who read Time magazine." Knowledge, in other words, is built in communities that share

assumptions, but those assumptions often go unexamined. Sometimes those assumptions are themselves products of a culture or a discourse, but sometimes they're not. Sometimes those assumptions are the products of conditions or civic circumstances that aren't reducible to knowledge. It's one thing to know the demographics of the group likely to read Time magazine, or to vote for Ralph Nader, or to be affected by certain kinds of advertising campaigns; it's another to see beneath the language, the discourse, and the arguments to get a glimpse of the structures of the polis that give those arguments shape. One place where Richard Rorty's pragmatism falls down is in his insistence that language goes all the way down, and that by changing the way people describe things, we can change circumstances. We may be able to change how people see the abortion debate by asking them to investigate how that knowledge is shaped; but faced with the choice of what to do in the face of an unexpected pregnancy, the material constraints placed on single mothers -- the scarcity of abortion clinics, the dynamics of one's family, the dozens of people holding placards in the street -- have palpable but often unreasonable effects, effects that shape what can and can't be argued. Argument is important because it forces writers to understand the how what we know sometimes butts heads with circumstances that seem beyond our control; and it forces writers to consider not just audience but the real circumstances that constrain audiences and the civic communities in which they live and work.

My third and final point, a point that follows from the last one, is that

argument is inextricably tied to ethics. Something high school students successfully take away from their English classes is that clear, critical writing helps them analyze and interpret literature successfully. But what's less clear is whether students understand what good this ability is outside the school or classroom (short of getting them into a good college). If we understand ethics as the analysis of one's circumstances and the ways in which those circumstances determine what we can do and how we can act, then every argument has ethical consequences, consequences that may not be precisely what the writer might have imagined. Even making an argument about the meaning of a text, or about the significance of a piece of writing, has consequences beyond the classroom. One easy way to see this is in an analysis of the positions some of the presidential candidates have taken this year. Beyond analyzing their rhetorical contours -- how effectively they are -- we should see their speeches as proposals for action. Saying that a tax refund for all Americans is tantamount to trusting individuals rather than the government is not just good speechmaking; it's also a statement of policy that implies how the speaker will act, and it has effects far beyond simply having an effect upon the immediate audience. Statements like these -- about trusting the government or about the significance of a piece of literature -- have effects upon individuals, real people, that ought to be examined. Argument is an ethical activity -- it affects individuals, changes their circumstances, and makes a difference for how they see themselves and behave in the future.

For all these reasons, I think it's important for students to see that what they do when they write is to make an argument, to take a position among other positions, and that by writing they are establishing themselves as members of a community, a polis, a discipline. It's sometimes not an especially lovely realization for students -- in fact, it can be seen as risky to put oneself out on a limb. But I'd argue that to see writing this way is to better prepare students for the kind of principled and critical work that they'll face not just in the first-year writing classroom but in college and as members of a democracy.